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SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICA STRONGLY SUPPORTS WORLD AIDS DAY

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[¶1.](#) (SBU) Summary: The South African Government (SAG) strongly supported World AIDS Day 2008, in contrast to its lackluster support in previous years. South Africa's Deputy President and Chair of the South African National AIDS Council (SANAC) and SANAC Deputy Chair requested all South Africans to participate in a 15-minute work and school stoppage to focus on the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS. At a televised event that took place on World AIDS Day on December 1 at the Sahara Stadium in Durban, the Deputy President renewed the SAG's commitment to preventing the spread of HIV and AIDS among all groups of people, and announced a campaign to prevent mother-to-child transmission.

The Minister of Health also addressed the nation, urging government, business, unions, and individuals to take a united stand to fight the spread of HIV and AIDS, and stressing optimism in the face of obstacles. The Minister of Health and the Deputy President encouraged South Africans to reflect on their personal responsibility to combat the disease and to care for the people who are affected by the disease. End Summary.

CONFRONTING THE STATISTICS

[¶2.](#) (SBU) South Africa has the largest number of HIV-infected individuals in the world, with 5.7 million people living with HIV. The national HIV prevalence rate among adults (ages 15-49) is 18.1 percent. There were also an estimated 1.4 million AIDS orphans at the end of 2007. Former President Thabo Mbeki denied that HIV caused AIDS, and his controversial former Health Minister Dr. Mantobazana Tshabalala-Msimang was dubbed "Dr. Beetroot" for proposing that lemon juice, garlic, olive oil and beets be used to treat HIV. A new study by Harvard University estimates that the SAG could have prevented the premature deaths of 365,000 people between 2000 and 2005 if it had provided antiretroviral (ARV) drugs to AIDS patients and HIV-positive pregnant women instead of denying the relationship between HIV and AIDS.

UNITY IN FIGHT AGAINST AIDS

[¶3.](#) (SBU) The centerpiece of World AIDS Day in South Africa was a national event at the Sahara Stadium in Durban. Deputy President Baleka Mbete lit a unity candle at noon on December [¶1.](#) She and SANAC Deputy Chair Mark Heywood requested the nation to observe a minute of silence and then a 15-minute

work stoppage to focus on the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS. The Deputy President and Minister of Health Barbara Hogan addressed the nation. The Deputy President and the Minister of Health were joined on the dais by the Executive Director of UNAIDS, Peter Piot, and a person living with AIDS. Members of government, civil society, the business community, and labor unions were also gathered at the stadium to demonstrate a united commitment to the fight against HIV and AIDS. Several radio and television stations around the country covered the event and other World AIDS Day activities.

THE SAG "WILL SPARE NO EFFORT"

¶4. (U) The Deputy President renewed the SAG's commitment to prevent the transmission of HIV and AIDS. She stated that the SAG's goal is to reduce new HIV infections by 50 percent by 2011. "Government will spare no effort" in the struggle, she proclaimed. Mbete announced that HIV-positive mothers and mothers-to-be should enroll in the SAG's new Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) Campaign program to receive ARVs. She highlighted the plight of children orphaned by AIDS and emphasized the community's role in taking care of AIDS orphans and households headed by children. She exhorted HIV-positive parents to test their children at a young age, and encouraged people to protect and nurture children who live in homes with HIV-positive family members. The children must be allowed to finish school, Mbete remarked, because the future depends upon them. Mbete also reminded women that they have a right to ask their partners for HIV tests to protect themselves and to decide when to have children.

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¶5. (SBU) Mbete listed some of the strides South Africa has made in its effort to stem the spread of HIV and AIDS. She noted that South Africa has the largest ARV treatment program in the world, distributes free male and female condoms throughout the country, and has many community and home care programs available to the general public. The only way to beat the epidemic, she said, is to take personal responsibility and to commit to "ubuntu" or national unity in the fight against HIV and AIDS.

SOUTH AFRICANS MUST LEAD RESPONSE TO EPIDEMIC

¶6. (SBU) The Minister of Health stressed the gravity and mixed emotions of observing World AIDS Day, noting that she and members of the crowd gathered with a sense of "purpose, sorrow, and optimism." She warned against being discouraged by the magnitude of the challenges presented by infection, illness, and death and stressed long-term commitment and individual leadership in the fight against HIV and AIDS. Hogan announced that the SAG needs the help of every person in South Africa to rebuild the health system and underscored her request for individual responsibility and participation by asking the men in the audience to stand up to show their commitment to getting tested for HIV.

¶7. (SBU) Hogan also relayed a story about an 8-year-old Eastern Cape child who overcame tuberculosis only to be felled by AIDS, and lamented that at the time of his death he was on a waiting list for ARVs. She pledged that the SAG will expand PMTCT programs and prevention for all groups, including marginalized groups like homosexual men and sex workers. Her comments on expansion of prevention programs for marginalized groups drew applause from the audience in the stadium.

THE SAG IS SERIOUS ABOUT HIV AND AIDS

18. (U) Comment: President Kgalema Motlanthe replaced the controversial Health Minister Dr. Mantobazana Tshabalala-Msimang ("Dr. Beetroot") with Barbara Hogan on the first day of his presidency. At the time, many wondered if the SAG was finally ready to acknowledge the realities of South Africa's health crisis and the depth of the toll HIV and AIDS had taken on the country. The first-of-its-kind work stoppage during the World AIDS Day observance and the high-level encouragement to discuss personal responsibility and involvement in combating HIV and AIDS reflects the new government's seriousness in battling HIV and AIDS. The USG invests a great deal of resources in fighting AIDS in South Africa through the PEPFAR program, but has not always had full SAG support for the program. The SAG's renewed commitment should contribute to a fuller, more productive working relationship in the effort to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS and care for and treat those living with the diseases.

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